CineFiles
University of California
Berkeley Art Museum & Pacific Film Archive

Document Citation

Title	**Death stills the erotic world of Curtis McDowell**
Author(s)	David Ehrenstein
Source	*San Francisco Examiner*
Date	6/8/1987
Type	article
Language	English
Pagination	
No. of Pages	2
Subjects	McDowell, Curt (1945-1987), LaFayette, Indiana, United States
Film Subjects	Thundercrack, McDowell, Curt, 1975

WARNING: This material may be protected by copyright law (Title 17 U.S. Code)

San Francisco Examiner Style E

* MONDAY, JUNE 8, 1987

Death stills the erotic world of Curt McDowell

By David Ehrenstein
SPECIAL TO THE EXAMINER

THERE'S NO simple way to summarize the art (or, for that matter, the life) of San Francisco filmmaker Curt McDowell, who succumbed this week to illnesses brought about by AIDS. For the last 10 years, in addition to making movies and collages, he assisted in the operation of the Roxie; for the last three years, he developed designs for the Roxie's promotional materials. If one sequence from his films could be chosen to exemplify his work, it would be the central segment of "Confessions" (1971).

In it we see McDowell lying on his bed in medium close-up, the camera suspended directly above him. As he looks up at it — and out at us — he begins an impromptu speech addressed to his parents. He wants, he says, to tell them all about things they "never knew." Some of them are minor — casual lies and petty thefts dating from early childhood. Others are more spectacular. "I've been in love several times," McDowell proclaims, "and only once was it with a woman!"

It's an amusing moviemaking conceit, brought off with wonderfully offhand ease. But one element marks the sequence as something special — McDowell's performance. He's smiling as it begins, but as it continues he becomes increasingly unnerved. By its conclusion he's in tears. Cinema — even the experimental cinema of which McDowell was a part — rarely gets this personal, and never this sincere.

McDowell was a singular figure in American avant-garde filmmaking

McDowell began his career as the protege of avant-garde filmmaker George Kuchar, creator of such cockeyed comic masterpieces as "Hold Me While I'm Naked" and "Corruption of the Damned." But McDowell quickly found his own particular cinematic voice.

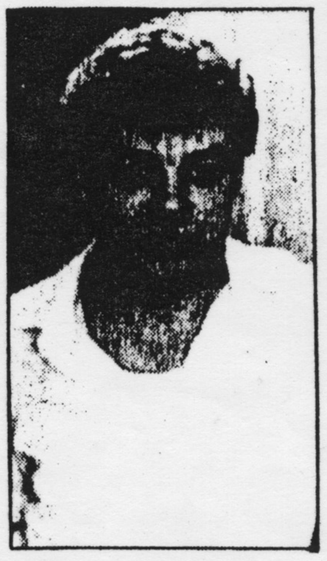
Throughout the 1970s he turned out an amazingly diverse body of work, almost all of it less than feature-length, and exclusively in black and white. McDowell cast his comic net over a wide range, veering from soap opera parody ("Boggy Depot"), to surrealist psychodrama ("True Blue and Dreamy"), to dadaist vaudeville ("Siamese Twin Pinheads"). The hallmark of his work, however, was an unfettered sense of eroticism that managed to encompass both the homo and hetero ends of the sexual spectrum.

There was no common denominator to McDowell's libidinal musings. "Nudes: A Sketchbook," a series of cinematic portraits of his friends, is one of the gentlest and most sweet-spirited erotic films ever made. By contrast, his *cinema-verite* shorts "Ronnie" and "Loads" were shockingly blunt in their detailing of the filmmaker's sexual obsessions. And that's not to mention "Thundercrack."

Written by George Kuchar, this feature-length film produced in 1975, remains McDowell's most widely seen work to date. Highlighted by some of the most beautiful cinematography since the heyday of Josef von Sternberg, "Thundercrack" might be described as the "Old Dark House" as Tennessee Williams and Al Capp might have reimagined it — with an assist from the Mitchell Brothers for the sex scenes.

Featuring a spectacularly eccentric star performance by Marion Eaton, as a demented grand dame who welcomes a group of travelers

— See CURT, E-3



Curt McDowell cast his comic net over a wide range

WARNING: This material may be protected by copyright law (Title 17 U.S. Code)

Curt McDowell, above left, during filming of 'Thundercrack!' George Kuchar is second from right

CURT

—From E-1

to her mansion one dark and stormy night, and a hilarious guest turn by George Kuchar as an animal trainer hopelessly in love with a gorilla, "Thundercrack" found a niche for itself on the midnight movies circuit that flourished in the late '70s.

But this relative success didn't change McDowell. Instead of trying to repeat "Thundercrack," he struck off in new directions with such short films as "Taboo: The Single and the LP" — a unique mixture of documentary and drama as challenging as anything produced elsewhere in the American avant-garde.

McDowell was a singular figure in American avant-garde filmmaking as it is currently constituted. While the movement has drifted increasingly toward academia, producing works of pea-pod similarity and parched aestheticism, McDowell moved elsewhere — toward audiences rather than away from them. He was one of the few experimental filmmakers to keep faith with the loose-limbed avant-garde practices of an earlier era — the films of Ron Rice, Ken Jacobs and Jack Smith. Like those film artists, McDowell is unique and irreplaceable.

Barbara Linkevitch in a scene from 'Nudes: A Sketchbook'

To say he will be missed is a barely adequate measure of the loss his passing represents to the American independent filmmaking scene.

WARNING: This material may be protected by copyright law (Title 17 U.S. Code)